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# Review of “The Legacy of Parmenides”

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# Essays in Philosophy

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## Book Review

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Curd, Patricia. *The Legacy of Parmenides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. xv + 280 pp. \$45.00. Includes bibliography, index locorum, index nominum, and general index.)

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The generally repeated view of presocratic philosophy goes like this: the preparmenideans produced a variety of ways of understanding the world and our place in it, Parmenides argued that what they were trying to do was impossible, and then the postparmenideans produced a different variety of ways of doing what the preparmenideans had done while being careful to respect the metaphysical requirements and prohibitions of Parmenides. In *The Legacy of Parmenides*, Patricia Curd, arguing that this generally repeated view is mistaken, provides a reinterpretation of Parmenides which aims to account for the peculiar fact that, contrary to what one might reasonably expect, not a single justification for metaphysical pluralism survives in the remains of the postparmenidean presocratics. This fact has often been recognized by contemporary commentators as a rather loud silence given that the postparmenideans clearly treated Parmenides' monistic argument with enormous respect. Supposing, in other words, that the postparmenideans acknowledged that Parmenides was right, and consequently that natural science, dealing as it does with change, could not actually be done, how could and why would they have troubled themselves to do what they actually did -- natural science?

The intriguing hypothesis advanced by Curd in this book is that the Parmenidean remains can be interpreted in such a way as to be consistent with postparmenidean pluralism. If so, then the fact that the postparmenideans both acknowledged that Parmenides was right and engaged in suitably modified natural science does not amount to a philosophical lapse on their part. If Parmenides was in the same game as the others were, natural philosophy, but less interested in rejecting cosmological inquiry than in reforming it (p. 64), it's no wonder there aren't any surviving postparmenidean presocratic arguments defending metaphysical pluralism against Parmenidean monism: there was never any need for them, because Parmenides never fundamentally challenged the legitimacy of natural science in the first place, but only the assumption underlying the various ways in which it had been done so far, namely the assumption that real entities could change.

The book is divided into six chapters, the first three of which, comprising about half of the book, concentrate upon Parmenides. The main task of the first chapter, "Parmenides and the Inquiry into Nature," is to argue that the impersonal verb *esti* in the first part of Parmenides' poem, "*Aletheia*," or "On Truth," should be read in a "predicative" rather than in an existential, veridical, or fused manner. By this Curd intends "an informative identity claim, an assertion that, when true, reveals the nature of a thing, saying what something is" (p. 39). This is later elaborated as follows: "If one understands what-is, one understands it in its entirety, and anyone else's understanding of it will be exactly the same" (ch. 2, p. 93). The predication interpretation of *esti*, she argues, "will allow us both to tell a coherent story about

the structure of the argument [in "*Aletheia*"] and to see Parmenides as a crucial figure in the development of Presocratic thought about cosmology and the nature of what-is" (p. 50).

In chapter two, "Parmenides' Monism and the Arguments of B8," Curd applies the interpretive results of chapter one to the arguments of Fragment 8 in particular. She here argues that Parmenides was a predicationist and not a numerical monist. A numerical monist, she says, is one who believes that "only one thing can be;" a predicationist monist, on the other hand, is one who believes that "only what is one can be" (p. 73), or, less compactly, "that each thing that is can be only one thing; it can hold only the one predicate that indicates what it is, and must hold it in a particularly strong way" (p. 66). It is a major claim of this chapter, and so in the book as a whole, that predicationist monism does not entail numerical monism. If she is correct, then Parmenides' monism is "compatible with a plurality of basic entities" (p. 65). Under this interpretation of Parmenidean monism, "there is nothing to be explained away in the Pluralists' response to Parmenides.... [T]he Pluralists' silence on the issue of the number of their theoretically basic entities is not a problem to be explained away but a confirmation that numerical pluralism is not the target and numerical monism is not the point of Parmenides' arguments (ch. 4, pp. 130-31).

In chapter three, "*Doxa* and Deception," Curd turns to the second part of Parmenides' poem, "*Doxa*," or "On Opinion," which she accepts as serious scientific theorizing on Parmenides' part. She takes Parmenides here to be advocating a model -- though not the final word on the subject -- of mixture and separation, but not of generation and corruption, for theoretically basic entities in cosmological explanation: "An account of the world as perceived by the senses that denies the reality of change and ensures that its fundamental principles do not allow for what-is-not could be allowed [by Parmenides]" (p. 125). What is "deceptive" about this part of the poem is that "Light" and "Night" are not in fact theoretically basic entities, since they are each what Curd calls "enantiomorphs," i.e. entities which can be comprehended, and thus can exist (see B3), only relative to their counterparts, such as right and left, outer and inner, and so forth.

The second half of the book aims to show that and how the postparmenidean presocratics followed the basic suggestions in "*Doxa*" for their scientific theorizing while paying close attention to the metaphysical requirements laid down in the argument of "*Aletheia*": the Pluralists (Anaxagoras and Empedocles) are dealt with in chapter four, "Pluralism after Parmenides," which includes a discussion of Zeno; the Atomists (Leucippus and Democritus) in chapter five, "Atoms, Void, and Rearrangement," which includes a discussion of Melissus; and Philolaus and Diogenes in chapter six, "Final Remarks," which includes a discussion of Plato, curiously called "the last presocratic." It is a recurrent theme of these chapters that not one of these philosophers seems at all concerned to argue for the existence of more than one theoretically basic entity, as it seems they surely would have had Parmenides in fact argued for ontological monism. Curd reads this unconcern on their parts as "evidence that Parmenides was not concerned to argue for numerical monism" (p. 171).

I enjoyed reading Curd's book and found it insightful and many of her arguments compelling. There are two particular questions I wish to raise for further thought. First, Curd interprets Zeno of Elea as "arguing [not] against a numerical plurality of things that are, but rather against the predicationist divisibility of these things" (p. 172 n. 118), and "[showing] that there are paradoxical consequences that follow from thinking that a single [Parmenidean] nature can be in two places at once" (p. 178). If Parmenides is to be understood as a collaborator in natural philosophy, and his natures are to be thought

of as somehow physical, why could they not be in two distinct places at the same time, as left and right sides of a bit of stuff, for instance? On the other hand, if these natures are to be thought of as metaphysical, or perhaps linguistic, what sense is there in allocating them even one place each?

Secondly, Curd wonders, in her discussion of atomism, "How is it that void, emptiness in space, comes to be called [by the Atomists, via Melissus] not-being and nothing?" Her suggestion is that a physical compound comes to be from atoms, not from void, and that "that from which nothing comes to be is itself nothing" (p. 205). But Parmenides might reasonably demand to know the difference between "that from which nothing comes to be is itself *nothing*" and "that from which nothing comes to be is *non-existent*." For unless there is a real difference between these the atomists cannot plausibly claim to have made the advance they imagined they did.

One of the strengths of this book, in my opinion, is that it seems to be aimed at quite a variety of audiences, all the way from typical undergraduates studying the presocratics for the first time to researchers whose interests include textual criticism. I expect, however, that this feature may be regarded by some as a weakness. Also, there are copious notes in each of the chapters and, although they are often informative, it is easy to imagine some readers eventually finding them too intrusive and believing that fewer could have sufficed. I'm referring, for example, to those that say little more than "For views different from mine on this point see author(s) A - n."

Overall, *The Legacy of Parmenides* shines an interpretive light upon Parmenides which is very different from the usual view, while advancing what seems to me to be both an engaging and a compelling argument in general. It also contains a good many original comments and suggestions concerning more limited points of scholarly debate. As such, it is in my estimation the sort of landmark book which will not only be referred to widely for a long while, it will also affect how the history of presocratic philosophy is taught, making it a piece of scholarship that contributes significantly to the field.

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